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ABSTRACT

This report presents a case study of the World of Wonders Accelerated Learning Community School (WOW). A community school in Ohio is a new kind of public school-an independent public school that is nonsectarian and nondiscriminatory. The report presents three contexts for the study--historical, local and methodological--and highlights some of the lessons being learned as a group of public, urban educators reinvent their work and themselves. Finally, it discusses the educational importance of this work and suggests implications for professional development trainers and school personnel involved in continuous school improvement, with special attention to those in the Accelerated Schools Project. Goals for WOW are similar to training goals for other schools. Participants are expected to become familiar with the Accelerated School philosophy and process and have a greater understanding of the personal, social and cultural issues surrounding school improvement. The goal is that participants gain a better understanding of the dynamic of both personal and school change and become leaders in moving their school through the Accelerated School process. (DFR)

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*The World of Wonder Accelerated Learning Community*
*A Case Study*

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## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to begin telling the story of a new school. It is a case study of the World of Wonder Accelerated Learning Community School (WOW). I begin by presenting three contexts for the study: historical, local, and methodological. Then, I highlight some of the lessons being learned as a group of public, urban educators reinvents their work and essentially themselves. And finally, I discuss the educational importance of this work and suggest implications for professional development trainers and school personnel involved in continuous school improvement with special attention to those of us involved in the Accelerated Schools Project.

## Historical Context

Authorization for the creation of community schools in Ohio was enacted in June 1997. A community school in Ohio is a new kind of public school—an independent public school. Like all public schools, community schools are nonsectarian, and nondiscriminatory. But unlike most other public schools, community schools are not a part of a school district. Instead, each community school has its own governing authority and is held accountable to

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the public through a contract with a public entity. In Ohio, conversion community schools are only permitted in the Big 8 Urban Districts-Dayton being one. Conversion community schools by definition are conversions of all or a portion of an existing public school (see State Department of Education, Resource Guide to Community Schools in Ohio for more information). The World of Wonder community school is in its first year of existence but was approved by the state nearly 18 months prior to its opening day in July 1999.

It is important to note that the introduction of community schools in Dayton has been lead primarily by private investors, business leaders dissatisfied with the public schools, and a handful of others. At the initial development of the "idea" of WOW, the Dayton public schools system was in turmoil and the superintendent was under fire for the huge deficit that the district was facing. The superintendent however, was willing to discuss the "idea" of charter/community schools within the district. The teachers' union was not. It was very vocal about their opposition to all community schools, but especially those proposed by for profit groups like Edison. In general, public comment was all over the map.

A letter to the Editor (9/17/99) of our local newspaper sums up some of the dissatisfaction and dissension with Dayton Public Schools that caused families to consider alternatives like community schools, and in particular, WOW.

I am the parent of a student in the World of Wonder Accelerated Learning School. Last April when I first heard of the program, I did some

research on the school and decided I wanted my child in this program when he started kindergarten. The WOW school staff was very open and available to answer questions and provide information on their school and programs.

Compare that to the Dayton City Schools. A month before the day school was scheduled to start, a school secretary told me that school would not actually start that day. After six phone calls and three days I finally talked to someone in the superintendent's office who could tell when exactly school would start.

Throughout this the attitude of the public school staff was, we will tell you when we get ready. Your job is to comply with our needs.

When I attempted to register my child in the WOW program through central registration, I got no cooperation and in fact was left with the impression that the Dayton schools were determined not to provide any information or cooperation to help students get into charter schools.

Even after my son was enrolled in the WOW school, I still get letters from central registration about his school enrollment. Apparently, the Dayton City School District doesn't know where its students are.

The school bus issue is just another example of the total degeneration of the Dayton public school system and its noncooperation with charter schools. Buses to the WOW school seem to be consistently late. Every evening students on at least one of the two buses must wait

in the cafeteria for the bus to take them home after the other students are gone. This is unacceptable.

The Dayton City Schools are either intentionally attempting to sabotage the charter schools, or the school district is so disorganized it can't provide the support. Either situation is unacceptable.

Local Context

In 1997, the Alliance for Education, a private, non-profit organization in Dayton, took a specific approach to developing the proposal for a community school, eventually named WOW. Initially, focus groups were held with various stakeholders. Focus group participants were asked to discuss their ideas of a "dream school". These ideas eventually became the foundation for the formal proposal submitted to the Ohio Department of Education. It was early in the idea stage that the Alliance for Education personnel became aware of the Accelerated School Model and connections were made with the Dayton Satellite Center director. Both parties joined together to draft the initial proposal for a "start-up" community school (i.e., one independent from the local school board), not a "conversion" community school, which is what WOW is.

During the 18 months between the state's approval to open a start-up community school and WOW's actual opening the search for a suitable facility took place. Since none was found, WOW supporters chose to go the conversion route rather than not open at all.

As mentioned before, a conversion school takes the existing faculty, students, and building and converts all or part of it. WOW converted part of an

existing public school. The building principal, who was a director at the Alliance and spent over 30 years in the Dayton Public Schools, was able to negotiate the hiring of his own faculty and staff. The only stipulation was that Dayton Public Schools teachers had to be considered first for any of the openings at WOW. This is a first in Ohio. Almost all of the staff is former Dayton Public School teachers.

Another first is the board sponsorship of WOW. Of the 49 other community schools in the state, only WOW is sponsored by a local board, that is, it is the only conversion community school in the state. The 48 others are all start-up schools. Much of the student population in the K-2 building is from the neighborhood; therefore, many of the families at WOW are the families that would have been at the school had it remained in the Dayton system.

WOW has a longer school day than the other schools in Dayton. The day begins by 9:00 AM and concludes at about 4:00 PM. Even though the public school busing has created some disturbance of this schedule, the WOW day still remains longer than most other area schools. The facility is better than any of us had hoped for. It was built to house kindergarten through second grade, so the classroom set up and furniture were perfect for our needs. It is an air-conditioned building so starting in the heat of July was not a problem.

The staff is varied in years of experience and arranged in clusters and teams. The approximately 200 students are arranged in either kindergarten, K-1, First, 1-2 or Second grade classrooms. Teachers chose their classroom and grade preference. All classrooms are fully inclusive and pupil/teacher ratio is

usually 20/1 or fewer. The faculty/staff handbook is two sentences long: "Use your best judgment at all times. Make decisions based on what's best for kids."

Barth (1990) once imagined a school as a community of learners where there is: a high level of collegiality, frequent, helpful personal and professional interactions, risk taking deliberately fostered, and a safety net in place for those who may risk and stumble. He went on to envision a group of adults who genuinely want to be in this community, who have profound respect for and encouragement of diversity, and who celebrate differences among children and adults. Barth continued his dream school image with stakeholders who constantly examine and question practice, but with a sense of humor to help create a bond when tough times occur. Barth's imaginings are some of the unique features that developed as the core team of founders (i.e., Satellite Center director, Alliance personnel, community leaders) and now staff and faculty collaborate and dream.

Methodological Context

The present study is approached from a Constructivist perspective. As a case researcher, I emerge from one social experience, my observation of the WOW school, to choreograph another—its story. Knowledge is socially constructed: therefore my role as a researcher of a case is to assist listeners/readers in the construction of knowledge (Stake, 1994). Because this is a case study, it relies generally on interviews, observations, and document analysis.

Specifically, I am a participant observer in classrooms and training sessions with staff. I cull teachers' journal entries. I hold teacher interviews, I mine parent surveys, newsletters, school artifacts, and I keep a researcher's journal. These are my primary data sources. I regularly attend events at the WOW school (e.g., Saturday in-service, Holiday program, Friday celebrations); I also provide training and technical assistance in the Accelerated School Model; and I am continually reflecting on practices and interactions, and revising meanings of what is actually taking place there.

Stake (1994) identifies three types of case studies. First, intrinsic (a study is undertaken to better understand this particular case), second, instrumental (a particular case is examined to provide insight into an issue or to refine theory) and third, collective (a number of cases are studied jointly in order to inquire into a phenomenon, population, or general condition). Using Stake's terms this is an intrinsic case but with an eye to being instrumental.

The school community is examined through both "insider" and "outsider" perspectives. That is, the faculty and staff or insider position is examined as their journal entries are culled. The same analysis is afforded my journal entries forming the outsider viewpoint. Granted, because I am in the "thick of what is going on" (Stake, 1994) my viewpoint is a limited outsider perspective. However, utilizing both lenses provides a fuller understanding of the meaning making attached to launching a new schooling endeavor. The use of multiple sources of data or triangulation also helps clarify multiple perspectives.

Member checking took place to ensure that my perspectives truly represented what insiders perceived to be happening at WOW.

Data analysis began as data were collected. Multiple documents (e.g., journal entries, state proposal, WOW literature, and newsletters) were examined to find overarching patterns. Data are sorted and categorized to form cohesive themes related to the foci of the study. The themes then render the organizational framework for presenting the results of the study.

Lessons Being Learned

A case study is both the process of learning about the case and the product of our learning (Stake, 1994). Because this case study is ongoing it is difficult to know what all the actual outcomes of my learning will be. However, since this school is the exception to many standards (e.g., state regulations for conversion schools, a typical training model for Accelerated Schools, and maintaining a working relationship with the local public school system) there are several lessons already being learned.

Some of these lessons, as identified by broad categories from the data, are related to Accelerated Schools training model, powerful learning, teacher empowerment, parent involvement, and reflective practice. This is just the beginning of what will be learned over time as I work, struggle, dream, and interact with the WOW family. The following sections are not exhaustive in content, but representative of the richness of thought and commitment found within the WOW staff.

Accelerated schools training model

As previously mentioned, the particular approach taken with this school in the implementation of the Accelerated School Model is a key focus of the study. Documenting both the training plan and the first year of implementation of the Accelerated School process is helpful in guiding possible refinements of the training model.

Our goals for WOW are similar to training goals for other schools. We expect participants to become familiar with the ASP philosophy and process and have a greater understanding of the personal, political, social, and cultural issues surrounding school improvement. Our goal is that participants gain a better understanding of the dynamic of both personal and school change and become leaders in moving their school through the Accelerated Schools transformation process. The entire WOW school (i.e., principal, teachers, paraprofessionals, secretary, aides) is being trained in the Accelerated School Model. The format for this training is similar to the model used at the Charleston Satellite Center. In fact, the syllabus and some of the assignments were adapted from the work piloted in South Carolina. All other schools in the Ohio network have teams of individuals trained, not the entire school staff.

The WOW training sessions began on a regular basis one-week prior to opening day, July 12, 1999. We have met at least once a month and sometimes twice a month for 90 minutes to go over the material typically covered in the nine days of training provided in the Basic Partnership Agreement Package for our new ASP schools. Our training sessions have been

eclectic in nature. Some have been primarily direct instruction of material, others have been hands-on work sessions, and others have been dialogues about books.

In addition to the typical areas discussed in our ASP training, we are also reading three texts. We started the year by reading and discussing Renewing America's Schools by Carl Glickman. We then read Martin Haberman's, Star Teachers of Children in Poverty and will conclude the school year by reading Fullan's Change Forces. None of the other "new" schools read these texts as part of their ASP training.

As mentioned previously, the participants keep reflective journals and periodically "hand them in" for my perusal. These entries served as key data sources for this study. Not mentioned is the fact that these journal entries are a departure from what most participants do during their training experience. A few other significant changes in the WOW training model include keeping a school powerful learning portfolio that consists primarily of photographs at this point and the tailoring of the training to specific WOW circumstances and issues. The following example illustrates the final point.

At about the time we were in the midst of our powerful learning material, the school elected to restructure how it approached language arts instruction. Since enrollment had finally stabilized staff decided to form a daily two-hour literacy block that rearranged both students and faculty matching strengths to skills to teaching practice and material. This restructuring was not without its

hurdles. But the unique aspect to our training was that all of our discussions about powerful learning focused on the implementation of the literacy block.

The connections between ASP and school situation are not always as direct in our other training settings despite our attempts to make the instruction as pertinent to school community issues as possible. When multiple schools attend the same training, there are multiple issues to address and multiple issues are not always completely discussed. Nonetheless, training the entire school community has many positive aspects that outweigh the few negatives (e.g., time commitment of trainer, length of time to cover material).

Powerful learning

Powerful learning is what we aim for in all of our accelerated schools. We devote significant amounts of time in formal training, and in informal conversations about how to provide powerful learning opportunities to all children. Improved student achievement is at the center of what we expect our schools to strive for. Understanding and implementing powerful learning takes time. In most schools it is the second and sometimes even into the third year of implementation before school communities begin to fully implement powerful learning school wide.

At WOW we've spent considerable time discussing implications of powerful learning and several of the teachers have written in their journals about powerful learning issues. One teacher wrote, "I'm still fine-tuning my understanding of the accelerated schools model and how that all fits for us.

Does that mean that remediation is out? Where does it leave those students who are continuing to work below level? Or do we accelerate from where they are? These are all things I need to clarify in my mind as the process moves forward." These are often asked questions and demand dialogue and clarification. After one of our sessions, the principal commented, "In my 35 years in [public schools], I've never had a discussion like this. When teachers got together they never talked about how to improve instruction. This is pretty remarkable!"

As mentioned before, one of the key powerful learning conversations centered around WOW's implementation of the literacy block. One teacher's reflection was,

> The literacy block is a big step towards meeting the needs of all our children, but it's like starting over in the middle of the year. At first it was exciting setting up a new room, but it is also frustrating trying to work out of two rooms. I have tried to involve the children in making decisions about the schedule and various aspects of the room arrangement. Sometimes it is quite time consuming to reach consensus and I feel like I am wasting time. When the children get unruly, I try to remind them that these are their ideas that they are not taking seriously.
>
> The integrated writing seems to make perfect sense, in theory. It seems to take so much time to get the ideas down on paper and some children get quite restless. I have them sitting on the rug, as the book recommends. I haven't had much luck with having them stay in their

seats too long because we have the chairs that were left over and they are too small for some of the children. It took a week and a half, but we did get a story written and the children are proud of it (they read it to anyone who comes in). They entitled it "The Best Learning Room Ever" so that indicates that they want to be capable readers and writers. I don't have a center rotation down the way that I want to; it is so hard to have them work independently . . . I know that change is happening. I have growth demonstrated in my literacy class. Some students can now write sentences that they can read from their journals, which they could not do three weeks ago.

Another teacher wrote,

> The children in our school seem more like "ours". The ones in my literacy block stop to hug me in the hall. We get to know more of the children now. Two heads are better than one. Now that we share children we can work and help each other with behaviors and academic issues and have a more common ground because we both know the children we are talking about.

The logistics of starting something new, the lack of adequate furniture, getting to know new students, working closely with another teacher, dealing with new student behaviors, taking a risk—all are expressed in these journal entries. It is evident just from these two teachers' comments that while collaboration is recognized as beneficial, it is both hard and time consuming.

Teacher empowerment

A third theme that emerged in the journal entries was teacher empowerment. Over and over entries recognized the part teachers play in the decisions that are made. One good example of this is the following. "I feel empowered by being able to make choices about what happens in school and actually having it happen. We have been pulling together as a staff. We have come together to make major decisions on report cards, scheduling, and many other tasks. I feel we still need to schedule more regular planning time."

The school secretary commented, "This place is wonderful! I am amazed at how well this staff works together for the common good of the students—for the common goals. Decisions are made by the staff and I am included as part of the team—what a great feeling! My voice counts!"

The staff continues to struggle with personalities and conflicting educational philosophies. Several teachers mentioned the need for more common planning time. But despite some of the uphill battles, most teachers and staff members feel a part of the decision making process and have a sense that their opinion matters. At a recent training session, the staff was "joking" about wishing the principal would just make the decisions and not keep asking them to help. One person lamented, "I just want someone else to blame." Clearly, this group understands that teacher empowerment can be both a blessing and a curse.

Parent involvement

WOW is no different from most of our other accelerated schools when it comes to parent involvement and its desire to have parents intimately involved in the school community. But WOW is different in some of its approaches to including parents and making them feel a part of the family.

WOW hosted a family dinner in October. The staff planned, served and cleaned up. The evening was an "overwhelming success". There were nearly 200 in attendance. One teacher, who was employed at the school before it was converted into a community school, reflected on the evening in this way, "The spaghetti night was a huge success. We are doing a great job with involving and welcoming our parents. Since I've been in this school building for the last five years, I am amazed at the change in parent support." When parents were asked to respond to a survey regarding WOW, the results weren't just tabulated and used by the staff; they were published in the weekly newsletter so that parents were informed of the results.

These comments and behaviors are significant since the parents who were part of the public school community are now the same parents who are at WOW. The parent community has not changed, but the way parents are appreciated, interacted with, and included has.

Reflective practice

The journal entries by design are reflective, so it is not surprising that many of the comments were reflections on classroom practice. The principal wrote early in the year, "This is much harder than I had anticipated. It is one

thing to sit in an Ivory Tower and plan the ideal school. It is a whole other matter to implement the ideal school. I think I have been out of touch too long. Our teachers are incredible. This is why I wanted to do this. To work with a staff that already believed. A staff that loves kids, loves teaching, is willing to take risks and who are willing to work together."

A teacher comments, "Overall this has really been a good situation. The greatest opportunity is being provided for staff and student growth. In my opinion things are not optimal yet but they are light years ahead of other situations in the city." Another wrote, "Staying an educational community is going to take effort. [We need to] grow to know our peers more. [We need] to stay focused on collaboration, not competition." A third teacher reflects, "I love the way the students in my room look at the WOW school as special. I think they are investing their ideas. When I had a parent here, the kids got a little loud, so I told them that they needed to show this mother how students at the WOW school act. They quieted down and were really good."

The approach taken in this research of looking at the development of the school from both an insider and outsider perspective provides a deeper understanding of what occurs when school communities undertake the restructuring of public education. As teachers' and researcher's journal entries were mined for themes, it was interesting to note distinct patterns that emerged around the thoughts, feelings, and insights regarding school restructuring. These reflections suggest implications for understanding how

individuals define the meaning of their work as well as the professional development necessary for continued growth.

Educational Importance and Implications

Charter schools are taxpayer-funded schools that are managed independently of the district bureaucracy by parent, entrepreneur, church or civic groups, to name a few. President Clinton recently called for 3,000 charter schools to be in operation by 2002, more than doubling the present 1,100 charter schools. Charter/community schools are a relatively new educational phenomenon that needs careful examination.

Educational restructuring/reform/renewal are topics of numerous publications, editorials, and local, state, and federal legislation. Millions of dollars are spent on school improvement every year. Research that can inform those involved with continuous school improvement is important, but central to school improvement are questions of how teachers define the meaning of their work and what professional development opportunities are needed to sustain the high level of commitment required of individuals who choose to restructure their school work and school roles.

We get a sense of the answer to these questions from the following comments, "I'm so bogged down with day to day duties that I forget about our dream. Our reading [Glickman text] helps, because it is quite close to what we're beginning. I really like the democracy focus. I want our school to be a place where we are civil to each other, parents and especially to children." "Students [are] involved with our [accelerated schools] study. [They] shared

interesting views of their dream school. I can tell they [the ideas] are a lot about getting along with others. It is so difficult to think outside the box." "I love Star Students-Star Teachers [Haberman text]. It is so affirming. I know I'm not there but I can do it!" "We are still struggling with trying to have team meetings for planning and collaboration, but the second grade team has met and we are working to do some across class grouping."

I offer the following implications for consideration. First, implementation of the accelerated schools model is difficult work. When the entire school is trained together, certain obstacles related to implementation are overcome (e.g., there are only a few coaches "in the know" about what we are supposed to be doing). Training an entire school however, is very time intensive and not feasible without sufficient staff at the Satellite Center.

Second, teachers find it difficult to set aside time for reflection on classroom practice. But when time is devoted to such (e.g., journal writing) insights are gained and classroom practice is enhanced. Those of us involved in school improvement must help our school communities to find what Harwayne (1999) refers to as "white space" or space that is freed from distractions that permits thoughtfulness and reflection.

Third, the most effective professional development is the work that teachers do together on site. Teacher feedback echoes what Cawelti (1999) reports. Quality professional development begins with a clear sense (in accelerated schools we call this vision) of what students need to learn and be able to do. The focus of professional development is on schoolwide goals for

student learning based on unique strengths and challenges. Professional development is built from a unity of purpose or a core set of values and beliefs. It is matched to the instructional processes or powerful learning and is focused primarily on content and content-specific pedagogy. Meaningful professional development often changes the school's structure and culture as new knowledge and skills are acquired. And finally, quality professional development requires generous amounts of time for collaborative work and learning to take place.

Final Thoughts

As with any singular case study, generalization is left to the reader. Nonetheless, readers should vicariously understand enough about this case to draw their own conclusions about charter/community schools in Ohio, what we know about implementing the accelerated school model, and what we know regarding teachers' reflection on practice that enhances future classroom practice and professional development opportunities.

As might be expected, lots of children's work hangs in each of the hallways at WOW. Early in the school year one particular hallway was adorned with life size drawings of children made from butcher-block paper. The drawings were arranged in such a way that they appeared to be holding hands. One of the drawings, whose adhesive came loose, was in the process of falling off the wall. Despite the break down of its "support system," the figure next to it clung to the drooping figure and used its "inner" strength to keep it from crumpling onto the floor. Both figures wore smiles on their faces. I snapped a

photograph of this hallway display that is now framed and prominently displayed in my office. It serves as a moving metaphor of WOW for me.

This picture reminds me of the strength of the support system at WOW. Whenever one person feels overwhelmed, there is another who is willing to support and hold the other up. The picture exemplifies the WOW Way: "We treat others the way we want to be treated. We respect and value all people. We are responsible for what we say and do. When it's time to work, we work. And together, we can!" A team effort is in progress and I'm not the only one who has noticed. Students have noticed too.

> " The sun came up. Wake up. Look to the WOW school. I love the WOW school. I go to the WOW school and I make new friends."
>
> "The boy was sad because he didn't have any friends. He went to another school, the WOW school. He made many friends."
>
> (Student writings from WOW newsletters)

Teachers recognize the kind of impact participating in this new school has had as well. The following declaration from one of the veteran teachers says it all, "I've decided that if WOW has to close I'm leaving the classroom." Some of her colleagues were surprised at the strength of this statement and chorused, "But why?" She simply, but straightforwardly said, "I've done just about everything there is to do in schools and [have] been in a lot of them over the years. I've tasted how good it can be this year—what it can be like—and I never want to go back." She was referring to being a part of the decision making process and

feeling like what she does at school is significant and makes a difference. I know just what she means!

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